

# First Idaho vineyard LIVE certified

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SEAN ELLIS/CAPITAL PRESS

Bitner Vineyards owner Ron Bitner, left, talks with employees at his Caldwell, Idaho, operation, last April. Bitner this year became the first vineyard in Idaho to be Low Input Viticulture and Enology certified, an industry standard that ensures farmers use good stewardship practices. The first vineyard in Idaho to be Low Input Viticulture and Enology certified could lead to more vineyards and wineries in the state seeking the industry standard that verifies they are using good stewardship practices.

CALDWELL, Idaho — Bitner Vineyards this year became the first Idaho vineyard to be Low Input Viticulture & Enology certified, and industry leaders expect more of the state's vineyards and wineries to follow suit.

LIVE certification is an industry standard that confirms a winery or vineyard is using ecologically sound and science-based pest management practices.

The industry created, non-profit group based in Oregon uses third-party inspectors to certify Pacific Northwest vineyards and wineries meet international standards of sustainable viticulture and enology practices.

LIVE certification, which also verifies that workers are treated fairly and waterways are protected from agricultural activities, is widespread in Oregon and growing quickly in Washington but has just taken root in Idaho with the Bitner certification.

Idaho Wine Commission Executive Director Moya Shatz-Dolsby, and ex-officio director of the organization, expects more Idaho operations to seek certification.

“More and more wineries and vineyards are getting interested in the LIVE program because consumers want to know how everything is grown and made,” she said.

Bitner Vineyards owner Ron Bitner is an internationally known bee biologist who already incorporated many practices encouraged by LIVE to protect his bees, including native plantings that attract various bee species.

He said it made sense to seek LIVE certification for practices that he was doing anyway since the label will help him market to a growing consumer base that wants to be ensured farmers are using good stewardship practices.

“Putting that certification label on your wine bottles is just another form of marketing that can help your business,” he said.

In addition to Bitner Vineyards, there are 247 vineyards in the Pacific Northwest that are LIVE certified — 225 in Oregon, 21 in Washington. Thirty-four wineries are certified — 30 in Oregon, 4 in Washington.

About 43 percent of Oregon’s wine industry is LIVE certified, according to Michelle Kaufmann, the Oregon Wine Board’s assistant communications manager.

Certification “speaks to a certain demographic of wine consumers, millennials in particular,” she said. “They’re willing to spend a little bit more to purchase a wine with that certification mark.”

The certification process takes about two years. For small vineyards under 20 acres, it costs about \$800 the first year, \$700 the second year and \$300 the third year. It costs an additional \$3 an acre for every acre above 20.

The cost for wineries is about 20 percent more.

Certification requires more management and it’s not cheap, said Washington State Wine Commission Executive Director Vicky Scharlau.

“But there are many wineries and growers who do the bulk of those things anyway. If you are, why not go (the extra step) and become certified?” she added.

Two other vineyards and one winery in Idaho are going through the certification process.

LIVE Executive Director Chris Serra expects more wineries and vineyards in Idaho to explore the program now that Bitner has paved the way.

“There’s always someone who goes in first and shows others it’s not as daunting as it might seem. I think Ron is that person in Idaho,” he said.